Character Education: Seeing a Bigger Picture

by Francis Wardle

The first public schools (supported by tax money) in this country were those in the Massachusetts Colony. These schools were created to teach children how to read, so that they could read the Bible, and thus resist the temptation of Satan. In fact the acts — in 1642 and 1647 — created to fund these schools were called "Ye Old Deluder Satan Act" (Uphoff, 1997). Many educational reformers, from Fredrich Froebel and Rudolf Steiner (Waldof), to the free schools of the 1970s and Reggio Emilia, were motivated by the need to provide the spiritual and inspirational nature of education and development. Even today, public schools in many countries, such as England and Brazil, carefully integrate religious moral teachings within the overall school philosophy. I remember the Anglican services that proceeded my day of English schooling; in Brazil morals are taught, beginning in early childhood, through an almost universal acceptance of Catholic beliefs, ritual, and practices (Salgarelo, 2004).

According to Wiles and Bondi (1999), one of the purposes of Taiwan's education is to teach eight moral virtues; the first of China's educational purposes is, "to develop good moral character" (78). Even most U.S. public school mission statements include, "developing good citizens," as one of their goals. Thus, moral instruction is an integral part of education.

Clearly religious early childhood programs teach morals. Recently I had the opportunity to study the early childhood curriculums of the Catholic Diocese of Denver and a Jewish Community School. While both included a strong religious component to teach children the rituals, rites, and forms of their faiths, they also emphasized teaching general moral values: caring for others, sharing with others, responsibility for the community, and respect for adults (Archdiocese of Denver, Office of Catholic Schools, 2003; Robert E. Loup Jewish Community Center, Early Childhood Center [n.d.]).

Roger Neugebauer has reported on the number of religious early childhood programs, and the rise of these programs compared to non-religious ones (1999; 2000). One reason for the popularity of these programs is the desire of parents to have their children taught basic moral values, which is also one of the reasons often given for the increase in home schooling.

Historical trends

All public school systems reflect the values of the culture and society they represent. Further, as those values shift and change, so do those of the schools. Early public schools in our colonies reflected the religious zeal and commitment of the citizens; after Russia successfully launched Sputnik, we passed laws and provided funds to upgrade science and math teaching in our schools, and to increase the quality of our science and math teachers. Head Start developed out of an overall concern that lead to the War on Poverty; multicultural education began as an outgrowth of the civil rights moment, and continued to expand to reflect the various liberation movements that have occurred since that time (Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004).

Character education also comes out of our cultural shifts. While our original public schools explicitly taught religious morals, the formal character education movement started during the Roaring Twenties; the second wave during the counter-culture revolution of the 1960-70s; and the third began in the early 1990s. All three of these movements are a direct result of the overall society's shift toward what many viewed as less moral, and more socially insecure times. (Many of us would, of course, disagree. As a product of the

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counter-culture, I believe many of the values that resulted are positive. Needless to say, society as a whole is skeptical, and society as a whole determines public school policies and programs.)

While these three movements constitute the formal history of character education (Elkind, 1999), the question of teaching morals in public schools has always been present. For religious programs how this is done is clearly defined; for public schools the questions are, what morals and how? Some early childhood programs are religious, others are public (Head Start, state funded preschools, and public school programs), and many are private — which means they are freer to choose their approach to teaching morals.

Teaching whose morals?

Throughout the history of our country, schools have seen a tension between the official religion taught, and others' religions. This came to a head in what became known as the Cincinnati Bible War of 1869-70 which was caused by parents who wanted their children to learn from a Catholic Bible or Jewish Torah, not the King James version of the Bible, which was the official Bible used in public schools (Uphoff, 1997). It was not, however, an attempt to take religion out of the schools. This general debate about how religion — and whose religion — should be taught in public schools escalated until it was resolved in the famous 1963 Supreme Court Decision, in the cases of Abington v. Schempp and Murray (O'Hare) v. Curlett, that said, in part, that schools could not favor — or disfavor — one religion over another. However this decision did not outlaw religion from schools. Part of the decision said, "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without the study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its advancement of civilization" (Uphoff, 1997, p. 114).

Some time after this landmark Supreme Court decision, outward-bound education and multicultural education began to develop and grow in popularity in some of our schools and early childhood programs. Both these curricular approaches include goals that involve teaching specific values; further, they describe the best methods to do so. Outward Bound includes self-respect, respect for others, responsibility to others and the environment, and working together as basic values to be taught. According to Ramsey (1998), multicultural goals include:

- children need to develop a strong identity of themselves as individuals, as members of their particular groups, and as living beings on this planet;
- children need to develop a sense of solidarity with all people and the natural world;
- children need to become critical thinkers — to learn not to accept the status quo but to ask good, hard questions;
- children need to be confident and persistent problem solvers so that they see themselves as activists rather than simply feeling overwhelmed at the difficulties of the world;
- children need to gain the academic skills that will give them access to the knowledge of our society and the power to make a difference

We need to create spaces for children to imagine hopeful futures, in which material wealth, privilege, and power are no longer the driving forces (p. 6-7).

These are obviously value-laden concepts, and not at all far from the basic character education values of respect (for self and others), responsibility (for self and the earth), tolerance, justice, fairness, honesty, and hope. Clearly Outward Bound curricular approaches and multicultural, anti-bias curricula are forms of character education.

Why now?

According to Lickona, there is a powerful case for including character education in our schools and early childhood programs (1991). (Since the audience for this publication is early childhood programs (infants to third grade) and school-age programs, I will direct specific ideas about character education to these populations). The arguments for character education today, include:

- There is a clear and urgent need. Young people are increasingly hurting themselves and others and decreasingly concerned about contributing to the welfare of their fellow human beings.
- Transmitting values has always been the work of civilization; in all societies one of the roles of education is to educate students in the values of that society.
- The school's role as a moral educator becomes even more vital at a time when millions of children get little moral teaching from their parents and where value-centered influence such as church or temple are also absent from their lives.

- There is a common ethnical ground that we can all agree to, even in our value-conflicted society.
- Democracies have a special need for moral education, because democracy is governed by people themselves.
- There is no such thing as a value-free education.
- The great questions facing both the individual person and the human race are moral questions.
- There is broad-based and growing support for values education in schools.
- An unabashed commitment to moral education is essential if we are to attract and keep good teachers.
- Values education is a doable job. (Lickona, 1991)

How to teach character in early childhood programs

The central questions for any programs developing — or adopting — a character education program, are the same as for any other curriculum: what should we teach, and how should we teach it? (Wardle, 2003). What makes character education more complex, as it does with multicultural education, is that maybe the how of teaching is more important than the what. According to Lickona (1991), the what of the curriculum is the values taught, the how is through the three components of good character: 1) moral knowing (what is moral behavior?); 2) moral feeling (dispositions — feelings needed to behave morally); and 3) moral action (moral behavior — behaving morally). Any character education program must include all these components. Elkind (1999) was right when he wrote, "To the extent that character education is intended to instill moral knowledge and judgment, it will have little or no impact upon children's choices in problematic situations" (p. 81). Added to moral knowledge must be moral disposition and moral behavior.

Clearly it is up to the particular early childhood program to develop their own set of values to include in the curriculum, or to very carefully analyze those used in an adopted program. Lickona suggests a program develop their own list, but believes they should start with respect and responsibility (1991). However, highly abstract terms used by character education curricula pose a major dilemma for early childhood programs: they lack meaning for the young children. Character education must be developmental (Elkind, 1999). *Loyalty* to a child is how they treat and are treated by their friends; *courage* is when they have the guts to defend themselves against harassment and putdowns, or stand up for another child who is being harassed; and *love* is caring for the class' pet rabbit. But words used in many programs are largely the product of an adult society, and an adult society's view of moral behavior.

To address this issue, when we adapted the Heartwood Ethics Curriculum from a K-4 program to a preschool program, the first thing we did was to change the labels of the values (attributes):

> Courage: being brave
> Loyalty: being a friend
> Justice: being fair
> Respect: respecting
> Hope: wishing
> Honesty: telling the truth
> Love: caring
> — *Heartwood Institute, 1996*

Then the curriculum must be DAP. Just as young children do not understand oppression, race as a construct, exploitation, racism and sexism, and privilege as we adults understand them, we must make sure whatever values we wish to teach can be understood and taught to young children. This requires a fundamental knowledge of Piaget's views of how children construct knowledge, an appreciation of the work on moral reasoning by Kohlberg, Lickona, and Gilligan, along with an understanding of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the social learning theory of Albert Bandura (Brederkamp & Copple, 1997).

How it is to be done

In developing or adopting an early childhood character education curriculum, programs need to consider these ideas, loosely based on Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis (n.d.):

- Character education needs to promote core ethical values as the foundation of good character, such as caring, honesty, fairness, and justice.
- Character must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behaving: understanding core values, caring about core values, and acting according to these core values.
- Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of the program's life.
- The early childhood program must be a caring community where all core values are present and practiced by all:

student-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-student, teacher-parent, administrator-parent, and administrator-teacher. This approach requires the continual development of staff and student leaders in ways to encourage and support these core values in the program. The early childhood program must become a moral community where everyone shares in the responsibility for character education.

- Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed. Thus the overall curriculum should be adapted and differentiated to meet the unique needs of each student. "One of the most authentic ways to respect children is to respect the way they learn" (Lickona et al., n.d., p. 2).
- To develop character, students need lots and lots of opportunities for moral action. As Dewey so accurately says, children learn my doing. Thus they need opportunities to solve programs, work cooperatively with others, engage in conflict resolution, develop classroom rules, and engage in service learning.
- Character education should strive to develop student's intrinsic motivation. Programs should minimize the use of external rewards and punishments, and move toward an inner sense of responsibility to self and others.
- The program must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character building effort, in an equal partnership.

Barriers to implementing character education programs

Like any other curriculum change, it's very difficult to implement a quality character education program. It is even more difficult to sustain the program. What increases the challenge is the requirement that the entire program must be and act morally, not simply the teacher and children in the classroom. Some specific barriers that prevent the implementation and practice of good character education programs, include:

- The belief that these programs are based only on fundamental Christian beliefs;
- The insistence that the 1963 Supreme Court decision prevents these approaches in publicly supported programs;
- The belief that character education and multicultural education are antithetical;
- The fact that, while character education requires respect for adults as well as children (Lickona et al., 1991), most early childhood teachers are not respected by our society (low wages, benefits, and lack of professional status);
- The tendency to want to simply use an add on, or canned curriculum, which is then implemented separately from the overall curriculum (Wardle, 2003);
- Lack of involvement of parents and the community to select and/or develop the curriculum — including choosing values — and then for ongoing input, evaluation, and monitoring;
- A behavioral approach (based on rewards and punishments);
- Not following the three components listed by Lickona: knowing, feeling, and behaving;
- A deep belief by some that values/morals are culturally relative, and therefore a program that celebrates diversity cannot find consensus on the values or morals to be taught;
- Luke-warm buy-in and implementation by some of the stakeholders: teachers, administrators, parents, community, or students.
- A non-DAP approach. It is my belief that this is the biggest problem both with character education and other values programs. Adult concepts of respect, justice, loyalty, and responsibility are simply meaningless to young children. Writers and implementers of these curricula must have a very clear understanding of the theoretical basis of early childhood learning, particularly Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Erikson (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Conclusion

Throughout time and in every culture and civilization, schools have viewed the transmission of values as a central goal. Further, early childhood programs are based on a set of values that include respect of individual children, honoring parental wishes, and the belief that we should prepare children for later school and life successes (however we define these). Basic values have also permeated various early childhood practices, including learning to share, not using "hateful words," respecting property (toys, books, the classroom, and playground), not wasting food, tolerance for diversity, inclusion of children with disabilities, development of a strong self-esteem, and learning how to problem-solve. Thus character education is not a new idea, or an idea isolated from current early childhood practices. The only real difference in what Lickona et al. (n.d.) say we must do: character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes core values in all phases

of the program's life. For some reason, this clear articulation and application of carefully chosen program values frightens many. It should not.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Teaching Whose Morals?: Wardle poses this interesting question that deserves consideration as you explore the topic of character education. Have this discussion with teachers, families, and other stakeholders as you consider the right kind of character education for your program.

Using the Right Words: The adaptation reported in this article addresses the important issue of what preschool children might call ethical behaviors or character traits. Take a look at the way Wardle adapted the common character education values. Use this idea to name and label the important information you got from teachers, families, and other stakeholders about morals.

Develop or Adopt?: Both might be worth considering. Take the list of ideas that need to be considered (p. 43) and go from there. If you are considering adopting someone else's program instead of developing one custom-made to fit your program, make sure to carefully consider each concern on the list.